

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) applauds the U.S. Senate's adoption of S. Res. 322, a resolution spearheaded by Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) that focuses on the perilous status of religious minorities in Iraq. The Senate passed this bipartisan resolution on August 5; this follows the earlier passage in the House of a companion measure (H. Res. 944) authored by Representative Gary Peters (D-MI). Both measures reflect many of the recommendations USCIRF has advanced and are critically timed ahead of the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq and as Iraq seeks to form a new government.

"USCIRF applauds this resolution for shining a spotlight on the dire issues facing Iraq's smallest religious minorities, issues about which USCIRF for many years has expressed concern," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. "Their future is far from secure and there is much that needs to be done."

Among other important provisions, these resolutions call on the government of Iraq to direct the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights to investigate and issue a public report on abuses against and the marginalization of minority communities in Iraq and make recommendations to address such abuses. They also call on the U.S. government and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq to urge the government of Iraq to implement provisions in the Iraqi Constitution that provide protections for Iraq's religious minorities; and urge the U.S. government to continue to fund a new minorities committee whose membership is selected by Iraq's minority communities.

These minorities include Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians and other Christians, Sabeen Mandaeans, Yazidis, Baha'is, Kaka'is, Jews, and Shi'a Shabak. They have lived for centuries in the region that is now Iraq, but currently experience targeted violence, have no militia or tribal structures to defend themselves, and do not receive adequate official protection. Many have fled to neighboring countries, where they represent a disproportionately high percentage of registered Iraqi refugees, and still fear to return. Those who remain in Iraq are now concentrated in Nineveh governorate, one of the most dangerous areas of in the country, where they are caught in the middle of a struggle for territorial control between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central Iraqi government and suffer abuses and discrimination as a result.

"The violence, forced displacement, discrimination, marginalization and neglect suffered by members of these groups threaten these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq, and

jeopardize Iraq's future as a diverse, pluralistic, and free society," said Mr. Leo. That is why USCIRF has recommended that Iraq be designated a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for its egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF urges the U.S. government to make these minorities a high priority in its ongoing relationship with both the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Among other actions, the U.S. government should revive the interagency task force on Iraqi minority issues that previously existed and direct it to consider and recommend policies for the U.S. government to address the needs of Iraq's vulnerable minority communities. In addition, USCIRF urges the U.S. government to work with the new Iraqi government, when it is established, to reconstitute its minorities committee so that it not only includes representatives of all of Iraq's minority communities selected by the communities themselves, but also is able to communicate minority concerns to senior Iraqi government officials and the international community.

For additional information and USCIRF recommendations concerning religious freedom in Iraq, see the [USCIRF 2010 Annual Report Iraq chapter](#) .

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257